HoustonPress

FOOD & DRINK

Happy Hour Review: Under the Volcano



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JUNE 19, 2024



The pina colada is our favorite. Credit: Photo by Lorretta Ruggiero

It's been a while since my husband, Classic Rock Bob, and I met up with friends for happy hour. May is one of the busiest calendar months of the year with graduations, weddings, holidays and birthdays that spill over

into the month of June. When some friends suggested Under the Volcano, the longtime Rice Village cocktail lounge and live music venue, everyone was in agreement and that's where we headed on a hot Houston Thursday.



Queso and salsa are crowd pleasers. Credit: Photo by Lorretta Ruggiero

There was no live music this evening which was fine by our crew who are always up for drinks and conversation. Under the Volcano has been around for almost 35 years and in a city teeming with craft cocktail bars and chi-chi speakeasys, it still draws in a crowd. CRB and I found ourselves parking a block away on a residential street because the bar's lot was packed. It was no big deal since the Rice Village neighborhood offers a charming stroll through 1930s homes and elegant new builds.

Under the Volcano is named for the 1947 novel by Malcolm Lowry, set in Quauhnahuac (Cuernavaca), Mexico during the Day of the Dead with a plot that revolves around death and alcohol. Taking its inspiration

from the book, UTV's interior and exterior create the feel of a Mexican cantina with two outdoor patios covered in climbing plants and walls adorned with *calacas*, or *caretas*, the traditional masks of Dios de los Muertos.



Under the Volcano has a relaxing ambiance. Credit: Photo by Lorretta Ruggiero

We seated ourselves at a banquette against the terracotta-colored wall illuminated by Mexican punch tin sconces, lucky to have found enough space for five people. Though there are two patios, indoor seating is somewhat limited due to the open space in front of the bar where guests line up to place their orders. UTV is counter-service for both food and drinks. For a running tab, patrons are required to surrender a credit or debit card.

The bar bustles with customers and orders. Credit: Photo by Bob Ruggiero

Our friends introduced us to the smiling bartender as CRB chose a frozen Cuba Libre and I opted for the frozen screwdriver. Both were $7 on happy hour. Otherwise, they are $8.75. We also ordered one of each of the happy hour food deals and were given a number for our table.

My frozen screwdriver was refreshingly slushy if not particularly strong in either alcohol or orange. The Cuba Libre was like a boozy Coke Icee and I really liked the flavor even though I don't usually like Coca-Cola. CRB thought is was "okay". He'd find his happy drink later.

Icees for grown-ups. Credit: Photo by Lorretta Ruggiero

Our food was delivered within just a few minutes and we attempted to make as much space as possible on our table. Our queso blanco ($5) and black bean and corn salsa ($4) were each accompanied by an overflowing basket of crispy tortilla chips, providing enough munchies for a group. We also received the happy hour tamales ($5 for two). I had ordered one pork and one chicken, each served with a small side of sauce; roja for the pork and verde for the chicken. Each homemade tamale was a good size and a bargain at $2.50 each. The pork version was a bit on the dry side but nothing that a little salsa couldn't fix.

Tamales are the perfect bar food. Credit: Photo by Lorretta Ruggiero

The pork rib tips were a little dry as well but they had a good flavor and were tender. They were served with sides of fragrant chimichurri and barbecue sauce for dipping. Three rib tips for $7 would have seemed kind of chintzy except that they were served with a healthy scoop of tasty potato salad which made it more like a meal plate. While the food didn't blow us away, it was reasonably-priced happy hour nosh and the portions did not disappoint. I would definitely try the tamales again because the dry pork was probably just a one-off.

The Rib Tips come with a side. Credit: Photo by Lorretta Ruggiero

For my next cocktail, I chose the Paloma. It's regularly $11.25, $10.25 for happy hour. It didn't taste much of tequila but it was well-made with its rim of Tajin and hit the spot on a hot night.

When the corner table cleared out, our group scooted over to it and were more comfortably situated, which led to us staying a little longer on a school night than we normally would have. When one of our party went out on the patio with the qualifier of " I only smoke when I drink", I accompanied her and was surprised that the outside temperature was no longer stifling. With the fans going and the lush vegetation around us, it was quite pleasant.

When we went back in, I discovered my husband sipping a pina colada ($11) out of a martini glass. He's accustomed to me sampling his drinks and after a quick taste, I knew it would be my next cocktail. Unlike the typical frozen version, this was served straight up with just the right blend of pineapple and coconut plus a

good hit of rum. Our tablemates were going back and forth between cocktails and beer with the drink prices being in the moderate range. One friend stuck to a straight up margarita because he liked the freshness of the lime juice used at the bar.

A variety of masks, both terrifying and comical, sets the tone at Under the Volcano. Credit: Photo by Bob Ruggiero

While the rest of our party was familiar with Under the Volcano, CRB and I were almost sure we had never been before. That was until a hazy memory from a couple of decades prior resurfaced and we realized that yes, we had visited many moons ago, pre-children. It's a story best left untold, though not nearly as harrowing as the novel's plotline.

This visit, we left as somewhat wiser adults having had somewhat intelligent conversations with other somewhat mature grown-ups. That's our story and we're sticking to it.

Under the Volcano
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This article appears in **Jan 1 – Dec 31, 2024**.

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